



IMPACT REPORT

LOCAL CENTER

2023—2024



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Letter from Our Founders

Urban Design Forum and ANHD came together to launch the Local Center because we believe New Yorkers deserve to have a greater voice in the future of their neighborhoods. Democracy has and always will begin in the public square.

Yet the public realm all across New York City is neglected. Many parks, plazas, and streets are not open or welcoming—in fact, many are exclusionary, hostile, and even dangerous. There are far too few events bringing our neighbors together safely in public space. We have so few opportunities to connect with our neighbors, celebrate our city’s rich and diverse culture, spur our local economies, and build power together.

The progress we made during the pandemic in reimagining our streets, parks, and plazas is fading fast. Outdoor dining has become seasonal and highly permitted. Outdoor culture and shopping are no longer priorities. Neighborhoods that want public life have to resource it themselves, through volunteer networks and fundraising campaigns.

We are risking deepening the disinvestment we already see across our city, where wealthy neighborhoods are served by great stewardship organizations like conservancies and well-resourced Business Improvement Districts (BIDs). If we want to build a safer, healthier, and more joyful city, we need to create the programs, resources and networks to create thriving public spaces in every neighborhood—starting in the neighborhoods that need them most.

We believe the Local Center is a powerful model with great opportunities to expand. We start with brilliant local leaders, who are deeply connected to their communities and the challenges they face, welcome them to express their vision. We then resource them with seed funding, a talented team to make those ideas possible, and leverage our connections in government to make those visions a reality. The bottom-up approach is not only possible, it’s potent.

We may be only two years in, and we’ll need your help, but the future feels bright. We need community leaders at the helm and designers in coalition. We need funders to step up and help us innovate. We need the city government to work with us, and city leaders to be willing to hear our demands. Let’s build a better city, where every neighborhood thrives.

Onward,



Daniel McPhee and Barika Williams
UDF + ANHD

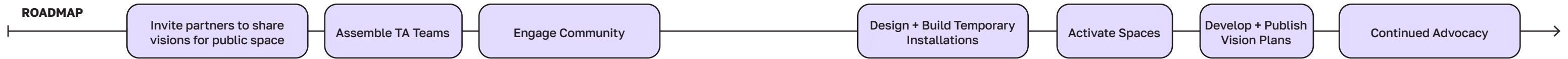
Our Vision



We believe all New York City neighborhoods should have the power and resources to shape their futures.

The Local Center brings together neighborhood leaders, designers and government agencies to realize local visions for public space.

Local organizations who advocate for their communities day in and day out know best what their neighborhoods need. Designers can support them to bring their ideas to life. Urban Design Forum and the Association for Neighborhood and Housing Development came together to create meaningful opportunities for community leaders, designers, and city agencies to design places that center community visions, resulting in more just and joyful public spaces across the city.



How We Worked

The Local Center equips local leaders with technical assistance, funding, and connections to reclaim public spaces in their communities.



From 2023-2024, teams across the five boroughs took on ambitious projects, each unique to the culture, history, and identity of their neighborhood. They launched markets, created history corridors, built creative installations, and more. Here's how we got there:

First, we invited local organizations serving historically disinvested neighborhoods across the five boroughs to share their visions for public space, tapping into ANHD's broad network of community development organizations. We kept it open-ended: share your ideas

for activating a public space in your neighborhood, tell us a little bit about your vision, snap a picture of the site if you can. We developed proposals in collaboration with interested CBOs, looking to create an accessible process that lowers barriers to participation and opens the door for small and large organizations to take on new roles in shaping public spaces. We also sought to begin our relationships with our partners with curiosity and in the spirit of collaboration. We received over 90 proposals, convened interdisciplinary panels of experts and local leaders to

select eight projects, five focused on culture, three focused on commercial corridors.

Next, we put out a call to Urban Design Forum's network to recruit teams of designers, planners, engineers, and lawyers to support each partner. We welcomed submissions from mission-driven design teams, and encouraged applications from M/WBE, emerging, and BIPOC-led firms. We supported neighborhood partners to interview and select their collaborators to ensure values alignment.

We provided seed funding from \$125,000-\$175,000 to support neighborhood partner capacity, low-bono design team honorarium, and project implementation. We also connected teams to government agencies to navigate permitting processes.

Teams developed creative community engagement strategies to learn from neighborhood residents about their ideas for the future of their public spaces. Many teams developed stakeholder groups including representatives from local social service organizations, cultural institutions, and elected officials.

Based on what they heard, design teams designed and built temporary installations that demonstrated what is possible in neighborhood parks, plazas, and streets: outdoor markets, shading structures, lighting installations, modular arts hubs, and more. Neighborhood partners used the installations to program the spaces with cultural events and community resource days.

Design teams created vision plans and visual toolkits that captured the ideas and priorities of community members in each neighborhood. These documents will now serve as a critical tool to facilitate future work and advocate for deeper investment.

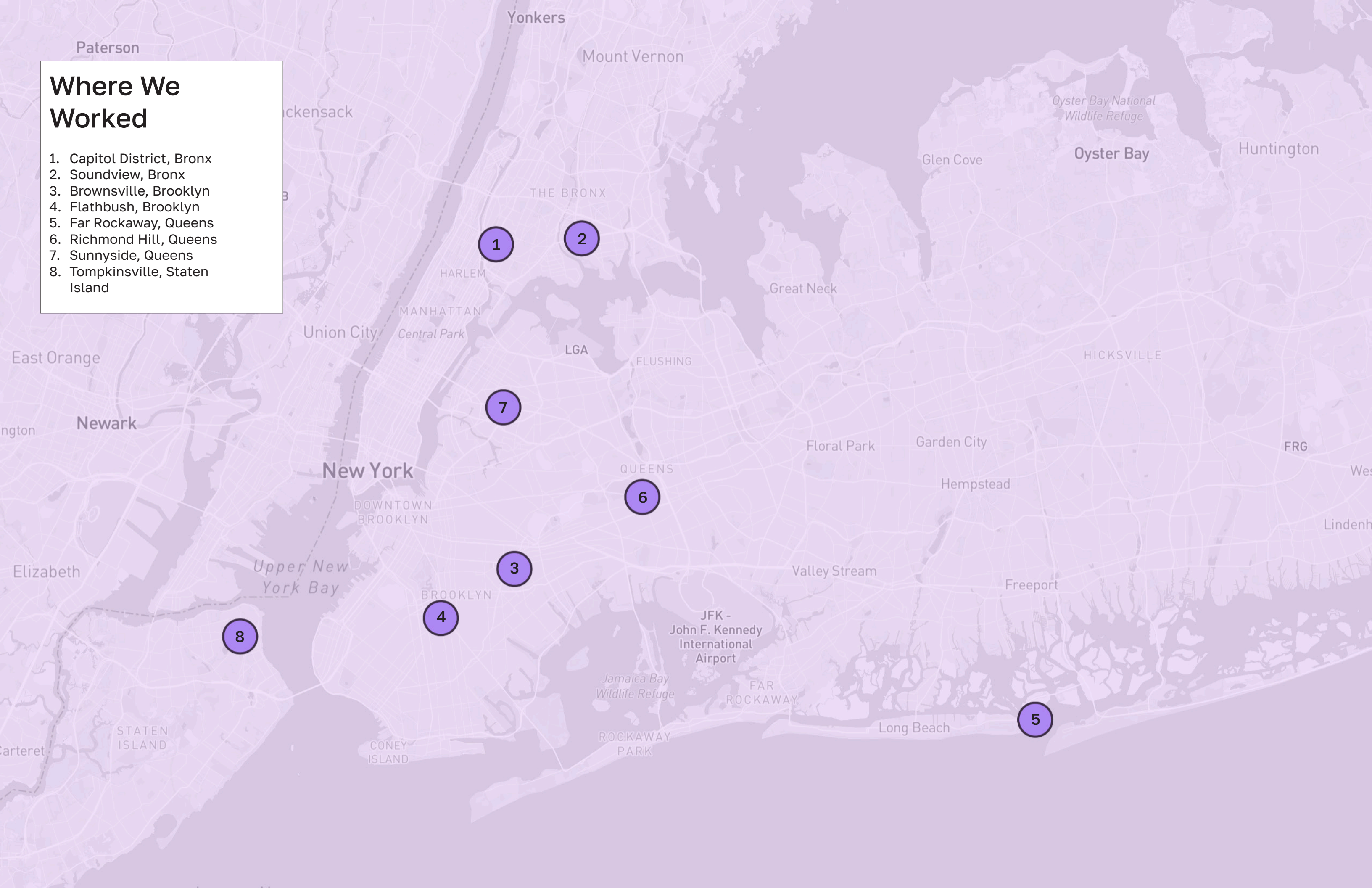
Along the way, we convened workshops and peer learning sessions to build capacity and share lessons across projects. We adapted our offerings to best meet the needs of the teams, from advisory sessions with cultural leaders, to permitting 101s, to feedback and problem solving sessions with peers. Recognizing that this work is often challenging or unclear, we created spaces for teams to navigate their shared challenges, build community support, and celebrate wins.

We also offered wraparound resources including video and photo documentation, evaluation support, press connections, and more to promote project storytelling and visibility. Throughout, we acted as responsive collaborators, joining bi-weekly project team meetings to cheerlead, mediate conflict, offer resources and connections, and brainstorm solutions.

Through these projects, local leaders, designers, and residents connected with their neighbors and built power to advocate for better public spaces together.

Where We Worked

- 1. Capitol District, Bronx
- 2. Soundview, Bronx
- 3. Brownsville, Brooklyn
- 4. Flathbush, Brooklyn
- 5. Far Rockaway, Queens
- 6. Richmond Hill, Queens
- 7. Sunnyside, Queens
- 8. Tompkinsville, Staten Island



OUR IMPACT BY THE NUMBERS

\$1.15M

in funds invested in
8 neighborhoods

10

public spaces
activated

38

public space
activations held

3,500+

New York City residents
participated in public
space activations

10,000+

hours of technical
assistance provided

\$2M+

of low bono value
leveraged

“The Local Center is an incredible opportunity to turn ideas for your neighborhood into action. It provides the tools, support, and resources to bring together local voices, experts, and partners to co-create a shared vision for public spaces. Beyond visioning, it empowers you to test and implement tangible projects that celebrate your community’s identity and spark real, lasting change.”

Alan Chan
Di Domenico + Partners



ROOTED CULTURES

- Richmond Hill, Queens
- Tompkinsville, Staten Island
- Flatbush, Brooklyn
- Soundview, Bronx

In 2023, with lead support from the Mellon Foundation, we launched our first cohort of Local Center projects focused on uplifting neighborhood histories and celebrating diverse cultural identities. From over 70 interested CBOs and 40 interdisciplinary design teams, we selected 5 neighborhood partners and technical assistance teams, who worked together over 18 months to reclaim spaces for markets, art installations, and public programs, each unique to the character of their neighborhoods. Four teams advanced activations in 2024, while one team is continuing work on an extended timeline. In 2025, we will work with our partners to continue to advocate for deeper investment in their public spaces.

RICHMOND HILL



QUEENS

Neighborhood Partner: Chhaya CDC
Design Team: Hive Public Space and Studio För

Chhaya CDC imagined transforming Lt. Frank McConnell Park, a small neighborhood park occupied by a war memorial, into an all-ages gathering space to celebrate the Indo-Caribbean and Punjabi communities of Richmond Hill. Along the way, they aimed to cultivate the agency of community members and create a secular space for community engagement and organizing.

Led by Richmond Hill resident Jess Balgobin, the Studio För and Hive Public Space team worked with Chhaya to hold pop-up events, youth feedback sessions, and community paint parties to hear residents’ ideas. Residents reflected wanting to see a safe space for immigrants who live in the neighborhood with food festivals, cultural events, and fitness classes, along with more passive spaces to relax and read.

In response to these ideas, the team designed the Richmond Hill Community Arts Hub, a vibrant multi-use structure whose colors are inspired by the homeland flags of the community. On the opening day, the Hub served as the stage for the Richmond Hill Arts Festival, now hosts a lending book library, and will be a resource for programming and services provided by local organizations.

Beyond the physical upgrade, Chhaya gathered community leaders and social service organizations to build a network of stewards to activate and program the space. Chhaya has also launched a regranting program for local nonprofits to offer programming and services in the park. With the long-term goal of ensuring that the community has a say in its own development and benefits from renewed investment, Chhaya will continue to build a community stewardship group that can guide the future vision of the public space.

“We had a really amazing activation in September where we debuted a fantastic play, Flood Sensor Aunty. I don't think there has ever been a play in an outdoor space in Richmond Hill before.”

Jess Balgobin
Chhaya CDC



TOMPKINSVILLE



STATEN ISLAND

Neighborhood Partner: Staten Island Urban Center, Staten Island
Therapeutic Gardens, Bait Ul Jamaat House of Community
Design Team: A+A+A

Staten Island Urban Center (SIUC) had a vision for Tompkinsville Park — the site of Eric Garner’s murder in 2015 — as a vibrant community asset on the North Shore of Staten Island. Aiming to create a space to celebrate Staten Island’s rich Black, Afro-Caribbean and Latinx communities that are rarely visible in public spaces, they envisioned a market that could offer culturally-relevant food, art, dance, and music.

SIUC worked with community partners Staten Island Therapeutic Gardens and Bait-ul Jamaat and designers at A+A+A to create the Tompkinsville Afro-Caribbean Food and Spice Market in the park. A+A+A designed a modular structure named Abuelita Masala to anchor the market as a functional art piece that can transform from a durable storage space during off-programming days to a versatile programming space, co-designed by volunteer youth.

Since opening the Market in Fall 2024 and unveiling Abuelita Masala, the park has hosted dozens of local vendors, salsa classes, food tastings, and poetry readings. SIUC continues to build on the pilot, including a recent addition of rain barrels to the Abuelita to collect water for plant maintenance, the creation of a workforce development program to support youth leaders to steward the next season of the market, and advancing an engagement process with their community on the longer-term vision for Tompkinsville Park.

“We are living in a food desert. Maybe not for apples and potatoes, but definitely a food desert for yucca and malanga and jackfruit and the things our grandmothers prepared.”

Kelly Vilar
Staten Island Urban Center



FLATBUSH



BROOKLYN

Neighborhood Partner: GrowHouse Community Design + Development Group
Design Team: Creative Urban Alchemy, Liminal, Partners in Public Design and studio aoa

GrowHouse Community Design + Development Group envisioned the Flatbush African Burial Ground, currently an empty, fenced off lot in the heart of Flatbush, Brooklyn, as a sacred historical space. Building on over two years of organizing around the space, GrowHouse worked with Creative Urban Alchemy to activate the site with creative programming. They developed a Black history corridor connecting the Flatbush African Burial Ground to other sites of resistance and connection in Central Brooklyn.

Drawing from the principles of memorialization as a collective process, GrowHouse and Creative Urban Alchemy created opportunities for descendants to envision the future of the site, built coalitions, cultivated youth leadership, and advocated for a representative design process with the Parks Department. In August 2024, the team unveiled a series of art placards featuring work from local youth artists that mark the beginnings of the corridor. GrowHouse brought the community together with a “Brooklyn. Black. Utopia.” activation, which showcased cultural heritage performances, a design forum led by NYC Parks Department designer Emmanuel Thingue, seed bombing activities, self-defense workshops, and mental health support. The team hopes to continue to expand the walkable Black History + Heritage Corridor, connecting sites of memory with contemporary Black-owned businesses and organizations, to create a living connection between past and present.

“The space of the Flatbush African Burial Ground is a space that holds trauma. How can we heal trauma in real time? The goal was to allow ourselves to wander and dream, using ancestral wisdom, healing modalities, storytelling, and design, without an end product being the goal.”

Shanna Sabio
GrowHouse Design + Development Group



SOUNDVIEW



BRONX

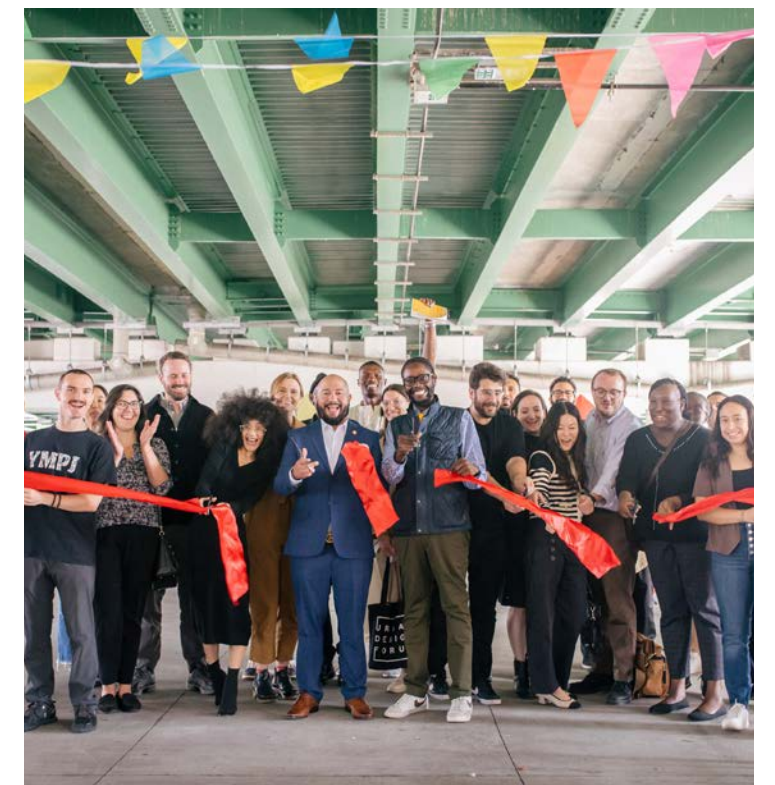
Neighborhood Partner: Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice
Design Team: Ennead Lab, Public Works Partners, Buro Happold, Cozen O'Connor

For eight years, Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice has been working to reclaim an underused space beneath the Bruckner Expressway into a community hub for economic development, climate, and social resilience. Working in tandem with Ennead Lab, Public Works Partners, Buro Happold, and Cozen O'Connor, the team came up with ambitious plans to make the space public, transforming it from a loud, dark space to a bright community resource.

In September 2024, the team opened a new public plaza and unveiled “Under the Bruckner,” an art installation featuring work by South Bronx artists celebrating the resilience of the South Bronx. Since then, they have been programming the space with local vendors like local bookstores and flower farmers. The project represented a critical first step towards the full vision for a Soundview Economic Hub. Through the process of temporary activation, YMPJ strengthened relationships with government agencies and technical experts who can now help champion long-term investment. YMPJ will continue to activate the site with local programming, while advancing key elements critical to the long-term vision, including a feasibility study and business plan, while exploring land ownership transfer and joint venture partnership opportunities.

“Our neighborhood has been coined the ‘Toxic Triangle.’ This highway network and system has some of the highest concentrations of asthma in the entire country. How do you create a mixed use space in this underutilized vacant space that can be a catalytic, exciting place for people to be?”

David Shuffler
YMPJ



CONNECTED CORRIDORS

- Sunnyside, Queens
- Capitol District, Bronx
- Brownsville, Brooklyn

In January 2024, with support from National Grid's Project C and the NYC Department of Small Business Services, the Local Center launched a second cohort to support small Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) to enliven public spaces in their commercial corridors. With the goals of activating public spaces, increasing foot traffic, and connecting more people to small businesses in the corridor, over 12 months, teams worked together to design creative lighting installations, activate public spaces, and develop vision plans to advocate for long-term visions for their corridors. In 2025, our BID partners will advance local visions for their public spaces by continuing to activate and advocate for long-term investment in their parks, plazas, and streets.

SUNNYSIDE



QUEENS

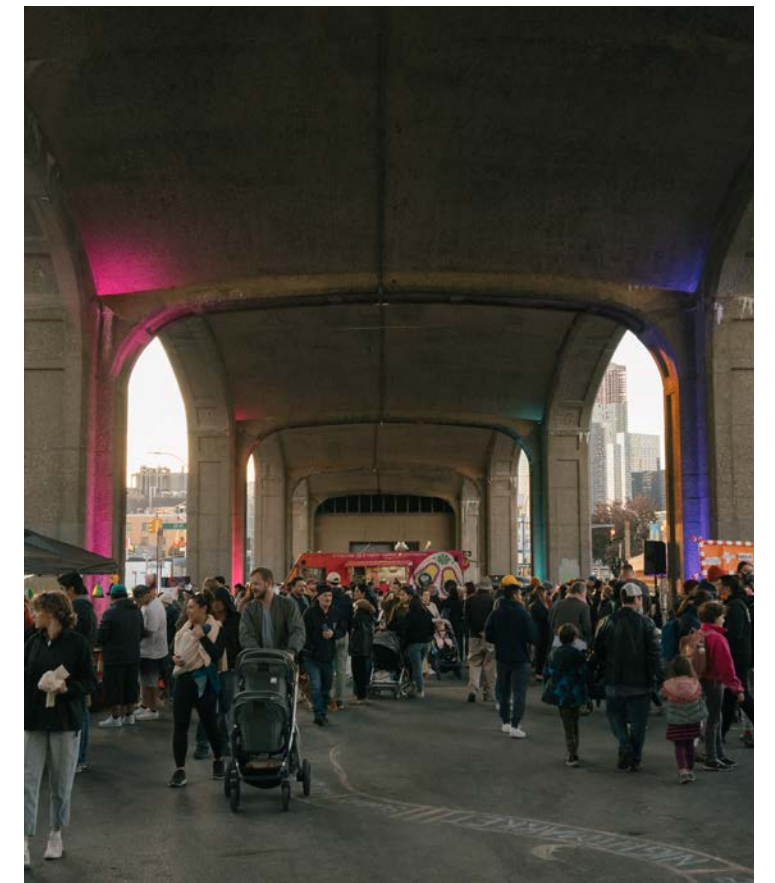
Neighborhood Partner: Sunnyside Shines Business Improvement District
Design Team: di Domenico + Partners, Queens Lighting Collective, Phillips Lytle LLC

Sunnyside Shines BID wanted to transform underutilized areas in Sunnyside into welcoming, accessible public spaces that reflected the neighborhood's diverse communities and fostered greater community connection. They worked with designers at di Domenico + Partners and the Queens Lighting Collective to transform Lowery Plaza underneath the 7 train and Sabba Park with the first ever Sunnyside Night Market and Gateway to Sunnyside lighting installation, which brought over 500 people to the space to enjoy food and merchandise from 20 local vendors, art activities, and performances by local dancers and musicians.

These activations demonstrated how art, lighting, and creative programming can enliven public space in new ways, bringing more people and engagement to Lowery Plaza and Sabba Park than seen before. The success of the project led the Sunnyside Shines BID to secure permits for more market events underneath the 7 train and funds for a new lighting installation on Greenpoint Avenue in 2025. The BID plans to advocate for more activations and physical improvements to its plazas, parks, and streets so that they continue to be lively community hubs for residents and local businesses.

“We benefited greatly from the partnerships with our design team. Our ability to think about our public spaces and how we might to improve them was enhanced and we expanded our networks within the community. This grant gave us data and projects that will allow us to seek additional support and to push government to work to improve Sunnyside.

Dirk McCall de Paloma
Sunnyside Shines BID



CAPITOL DISTRICT



BRONX

Neighborhood Partner: 161st Street Business Improvement District
Design Team: MUD Workshop, Habitat Workshop, Sichte Studio, Phillips Lytle LLC

The 161st Street BID saw an opportunity to turn Lou Gehrig Plaza, a prominent but underutilized public space along the 161st Street corridor, into a connected, safe, and vibrant destination for people that lived in and visited the area. The BID worked with a multidisciplinary team of designers from MUD Workshop, Habitat Workshop and Sichte Studio to engage a Steering Committee of local businesses, organizations, and residents to guide the vision for Lou Gehrig Plaza. This process revealed the need for more seating, shading, light, and activities to make the space feel more safe, accessible, and lively.

The team responded by piloting the SAIL installation, which combined three shade and seating structures with colorful benches and lighting fixtures in the plaza. The BID organized several events around SAIL, including concerts, a 9/11 remembrance ceremony, a LGBTQ runway ball, and a Friendsgiving Food Drive. These activations paired with the installation turned what used to be a pass-through plaza into a place where community residents came to stay and spend time together. The BID plans to expand the SAIL installation to other areas in the district, bring more programming to its spaces, and make physical improvements in the public realm to create a more vibrant, connected corridor.

“I wanted to bring bigger, bolder ideas to the district. The Local Center project added something physically to Lou Gehrig Plaza that addressed what we heard from the community. It was something that had never been done before.”

Trey Jenkins
161st Street BID



BROWNSVILLE



BROOKLYN

Neighborhood Partner: Pitkin Avenue Business Improvement District
Design Team: Studio Cooke John Architecture + Design, Phillips Lytle LLC

The Pitkin Avenue BID wanted to transform its public spaces — including Zion Triangle, Thatford Street Cul-de-Sac, and Osborn Street Cul-de-Sac — into local destinations that celebrate the history, culture, and community spirit of the neighborhood. The BID worked with Studio Cooke John Architecture + Design to identify what residents wanted to see in their public spaces. This engagement revealed the need for safer, beautiful, clean, and well-lit public spaces that could be used for community celebration.

The team directly responded to feedback from the community by designing and implementing temporary public space activations, including the Brownsville Is lighting installation in Zion Triangle. As the first public artwork in Brownsville that is not a mural, the lighting installation increased liveliness and feelings of safety in Zion Triangle. The BID is advancing other ideas to transform Zion Triangle Plaza, Pitkin Avenue, and nearby cul-de-sacs into safe and welcoming spaces for residents of Brownsville and adjacent neighborhoods.

“At the beginning of the process, Tiera [Mack, Executive Director of the Pitkin Avenue BID,] said to us that Brownsville is often studied but under-delivered. Our vision plan has a longer roadmap but it was meaningful to have a physical installation that everyone had a significant part in forming and could realize in the short term.

Nina Cooke John
Studio Cooke John Architecture + Design



OUR IMPACT



1 Projects built community pride and belonging in public spaces

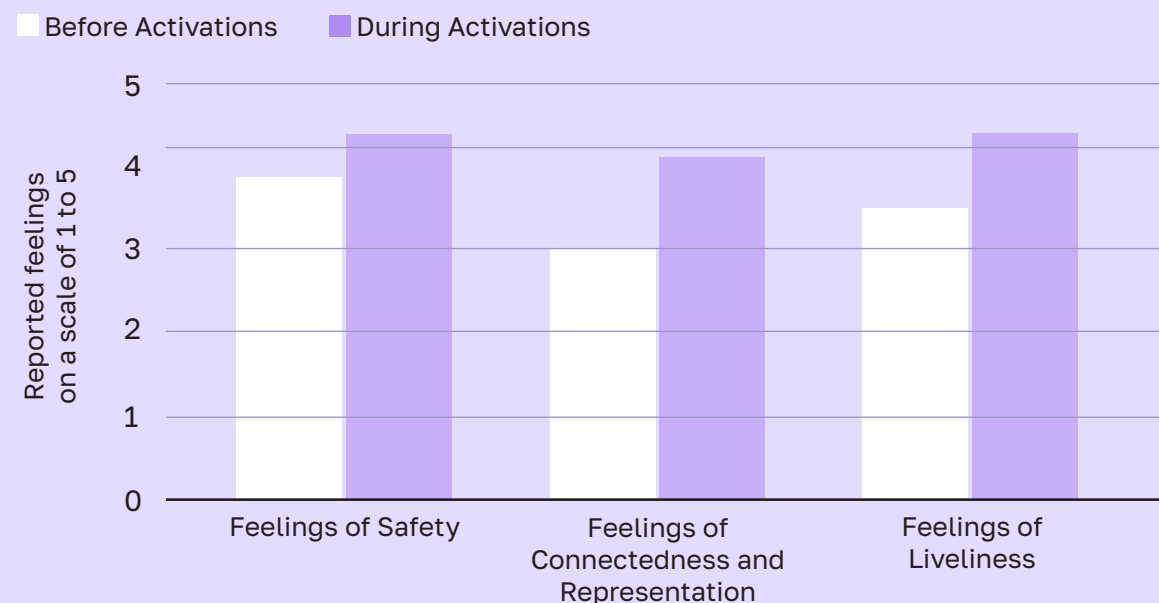
Across the seven neighborhoods, Local Center projects cultivated a greater sense of community ownership, safety, and liveliness in public spaces. The pilot installations and activations temporarily transformed what used to be pass-through or inaccessible spaces in the neighborhoods into spaces where more people spent time, connected, and celebrated together. Community members also felt a greater sense of cultural representation and belonging in the spaces when they saw their identities and stories reflected in the design of the installations and events.

In intercept surveys we conducted before and during activations, which reached over 130 people, 100% of respondents reported feeling safer, more connected, and that the space felt livelier during activations than prior. Respondents reported feeling 35% more connected and represented in the public space, and 12% safer than prior to the Local Center activation.

96%

of respondents said the changes make them want to spend more time in the space

CHANGE IN EXPERIENCE OF PUBLIC SPACES



“Seeing other residents here enjoying the space makes it feel safe. It feels nice now that more events and people are coming here.

Tompkinsville Afro-Caribbean Food + Spice Market attendee

2 Pilot projects proved change is possible and built trust

Through pilot activations like a night market under an elevated train, a shading structure in a plaza, and an art exhibit under an expressway, the teams showed tangible improvements to underutilized public spaces in a short time frame.

The pilot projects allowed our community partners to start rebuilding community trust in planning processes in neighborhoods that are often over-studied and under-delivered. Through quickly realized activations that responded to local ideas, each organization generated more confidence in their ability to listen to and directly respond to community priorities. Their projects demonstrated possibilities to build momentum for their visions.

5,000+

New Yorkers engaged in the design process

“A lot of projects specifically in my community have been started and never have been completed, especially this quickly. This project showed the community that this can be done and things can be completed.”

Tiera Mack
Pitkin Avenue BID

“161st Street BID is now able to have conversations in part because the temporary installation was already there as a reference point; establishing a vendor in the plaza is now put in motion due to the pilot project. I think the pilot project is really, really useful as part of this overall scheme.”

Francesca Bastianini
Sighte Studio

3 Local partners built capacity and gained tools to lead transformational public space projects

Our neighborhood partners have been able to leverage the skills and experience they developed through their Local Center projects to build their leadership credibility and secure more funding for other public realm projects. Our partners reported that their **knowledge and capacity increased “significantly or somewhat” in 97%** of areas of expertise critical to leadership in public realm work, including city agency processes for activating and stewarding public space, inclusive community engagement, data collection and evaluation, storytelling, and more.

Neighborhood partners gained the critical tool of public space vision plans to continue to advocate for their long-term visions. Partners reflected that the vision plans equipped them with the necessary data and compelling visualizations to make the case for further investment.

“The project grew me as a leader and increased the reach of the Pitkin Avenue BID more than what I expected.”

Tiera Mack
Pitkin Avenue BID

“The Local Center connected us to design firms and really facilitated this process of community centered work, and allowed us to engage with processes that we were not familiar with in terms of urban planning, urban design and architecture, and helped us navigate city agencies and processes for setting up these structures in parks like this.”

Jessica Balgobin
Chhaya CDC

4 New York’s world-class design community invested in neighborhoods and built civic practices

Our design partners grew their firms’ ability to work on community-driven public space projects. In addition to expanding designers’ skillsets, projects brought more meaning to their work. Beyond traditional design skills, teams reported that their knowledge grew in many areas critical to working with community based organizations on public space projects, such as tactics for engaging with local stakeholders, permitting and land use, collaboration approaches between CBOs and designers, and more. In addition, **92% of firms surveyed at the end of 2024 said the program offered opportunities to grow their practice.**

“The Local Center helped me get more involved in community networks and feel a sense of belonging and purpose in my neighborhood and my borough.”

Ifeoma Ebo
Creative Urban Alchemy

5 We supported government learning and innovation to respond to local priorities

Our partnerships with city agencies yielded successful installations across the projects by streamlining access to permitting processes. In the process, we enabled government to more nimbly improve public spaces. We provided the support to explore and test creative solutions to local priorities that fell out of the current bounds of traditional government programs, demonstrating where innovation is possible to better meet neighborhood needs.

“I am very pleased with the realized projects...I learned a lot, from navigating community conversations to the additional layers and processes that come along with drilling! It also prompted us to have a broader conversation with our Forestry division to be more mindful of trees and streamline future installations.”

Elizabeth Masella
NYC Department of Parks and Recreation

6 We built an ecosystem of new connections and enduring partnerships

Our role as a connector, convener, and capacity builder provided the resources and structure that supported the project teams in building a powerful new network of leaders in public space. Our neighborhood partners and design teams reported making over 500 new connections to peers, interdisciplinary technical assistance providers, neighborhood stakeholders, city government, and more. Many of the teams brought together are now partnering on additional projects that expand the work they started.

“I live in the neighborhood that we worked in, and have a very deep relationship with it. However, through the project, that network and bridge building further expanded. It enriched the complexity of my understanding of the neighborhood in a productive way, especially with the hope of doing future projects like this.”

Krit Robinson
Queens Lighting Collective

“The partnerships we got were transformative - we are continuing to work with di Domenico + Partners and the Queens Lighting Collective, including on additional work in Lowery Plaza. Bringing this team together allowed us to take our vision to a whole new level.”

Dirk McCall
Sunnyside Shines BID



LESSONS FROM THE LOCAL CENTER

Lessons from the Local Center

With support from the Local Center, our partners have been able to take on ambitious projects, each unique to the culture, history, and identity of their neighborhood.



While we believe our model tackles some of the biggest barriers by providing resources, technical assistance, and connections, we observed broader challenges that we need to solve. Community-based organizations (CBOs), the design community, private sector funders, and city government are all critical leaders shaping the public realm, but they often work in silos that make community-led planning difficult to resource and implement.

These challenges are byproducts of the inequitable way we resource and design public spaces. Our city's budget, governance, and planning process advantage a select few neighborhoods, while other neighborhoods suffer

from the decades of segregation and disinvestment that leave them without access to quality public space. Neighborhoods with majority Black and/or Latinx residents have less access to parks, less tree canopy cover, and higher noise pollution. Low- and moderate-income neighborhoods are generally not served by well-heeled conservancies or Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), like wealthy neighborhoods in the city are. Despite these patterns of disinvestment, local leaders and organizations are providing vibrant programming in public spaces, often on their own time and dollar.

● Constraints on CBOs

Of the CBOs that serve as public space stewards—taking on a host of operational, programmatic, maintenance, and design responsibilities—many do not have the access and resources of conservancies and large BIDs. Particularly since the beginning of the pandemic, when gathering indoors meant risking public health, many CBOs have developed their expertise in stewarding public space. This includes community development corporations, tenant and block associations, arts and culture groups, religious institutions, and street vendors and storefront businesses. Many of these organizations can benefit from an infusion of resources, like those provided by the Local Center.

Shanna Sabio, Co-Founder of GrowHouse Community Design + Development, told us, “The Local Center brought structure and support to our relatively scrappy organization. Our design team showcased ways that structure and community passion could intersect and evolve a project significantly.”

While organizations like GrowHouse — along with young people, multi-generational families, and other residents — actively use and transform their public spaces, their priorities and visions are often not seen as legitimate uses and do not gain adequate resourcing and support from city government. Street vendors, some of New York City's most essential users of public space, are criminalized for their presence, and fear of discrimination and policing may stop some groups from pursuing formal processes in the public realm.

● Lack of Support for Civic Design Practice

The design field and the broader

community of technical experts who shape the built environment also face significant challenges. Despite the extensive network of dedicated designers and planners in New York City's world-class firms, their skills and expertise are often funneled to projects that don't actively address the inequitable distribution of design resources in our neighborhoods. The framing of “pro-bono” and “low-bono” doesn't adequately capture the value that comes from engaging in community-led projects, and small or emerging firms often can't take on those projects without additional resources.

Fauzia Khanani, Founder and Principal at Studio Fōr, reflected on the impact of the Local Center on her firm's ability to partner with Chhaya CDC and transform a small park in Richmond Hill. “For us, the Local Center was a way for us to plug in to doing public space work, which is often difficult to get, especially as a small architecture firm in New York City,” she said. Even in larger, more established firms, capacity for civic design is lacking, and designers are not incentivized to take on community-led projects.

● Restricted Private Funding

The private sector plays an essential role in providing resources for community-led design in the public realm. Through the Local Center, we have seen the impact that private dollars can have in implementing pilot projects and visioning for the future in New York City's public spaces. However, we have also seen that public space falls in between common funding verticals, making it harder to secure support for this work. Additionally, while many micro-grant programs exist, adequately robust investments are few and far-between, limiting local organizations' abilities to demonstrate their visions in tangible ways. Finally, short grant timelines create rushed,

Illustrating Neighborhood Disparities

In the current landscape of public realm management in New York City, Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) take on a significant role, caring for our commercial corridors and the public spaces in their districts. With robust public space programming, visitorship to commercial corridors increases, small businesses thrive, and the neighborhood benefits from the local economy. However, the majority of a BID’s revenue comes from a tax assessment paid by property owners. Neighborhoods where property values are higher generally have well-resourced BIDs, while BIDs in neighborhoods with lower property values – often neighborhoods where low- and moderate-income people of color live – manage their public spaces on a limited budget, supplemented by city programs and private funding.

Business Improvement District	FY23 Assessment Revenue	FY23 Expenses
Meatpacking District BID	\$2,762,760	\$3,698,890
Union Square Partnership	\$3,400,000	\$3,940,623
Pitkin Avenue BID	\$225,000	\$856,260
Sunnyside Shines BID	\$360,000	\$516,700

Source: New York City Department of Small Business Services, SBS Neighborhood Development Map.

Through the Local Center, the Pitkin Avenue BID completed a lighting installation and programmed activation events in Zion Triangle, and Sunnyside Shines BID piloted a night market under the 7 train. Both teams worked with a budget of \$175,000, which is equal to three quarters of what Pitkin Avenue BID receives through its assessment. The Local Center grant is only a small fraction of what larger BIDs spend on their public realm work.

Larger BIDs like Union Square Partnership and the Meatpacking District BID received assessments over three million dollars. Union Square Partnership’s FY23 assessment revenue alone was over 15 times the Pitkin Avenue BID’s assessment revenue in the same year, allowing them to staff robust programs in maintenance, stewardship, and programming, along with public space design and planning. Both Union Square Partnership and Meatpacking have dedicated planning directors who lead the visioning and design processes. Compared to the five to 10 staff at these larger BIDs, Pitkin Avenue BID and Sunnyside Shines have two and three staff members, respectively, to handle all BID operations.

deliverable-focused projects that can be disconnected from community needs. Without deeper investment and multi-year funding, these projects are limited to short-term impact, and CBOs who are leading them need to dedicate more time to fundraising than to engaging communities and delivering results.

● Inadequate Public Resource Allocation and Coordination

City agencies have been dedicated partners to public space stewards. Yet larger challenges loom: a risk-averse law department, chronic under-funding, and challenges to inter-agency collaboration all complicate the process. Even with extensive resources, Local Center teams faced challenges like burdensome city permitting processes, expensive insurance and liability requirements, difficulty connecting to electricity and water, and uncertain pathways to capital investment and permanent change.

For the CBOs that do have adequate capacity and interest, the City allocates public resources and relies on them to take on work, not only in the public realm, but across all city functions. At the same time, government bureaucracy and narrowly defined city programs dampens the potential for hyper-local solutions, stalls creativity in programming and design, and keeps our public spaces from truly reflecting community visions.

One Local Center partner, the Staten Island Urban Center, worked with the design firm A+A+A to permit and install a multi-use structure with the Department of Parks and Recreation. After all the work that went into building and installing the structure, the team realized they had no clear pathway to sustain this valuable new park asset beyond the one-year permit period. According to Arianna Deane, co-founder of A+A+A, “A big challenge is longevity. It feels wasteful to go through such meaningful engagement

and develop a community asset and not have a clear pathway to deliver more lasting change for the neighborhood.”

● Fragmented Regulatory System

Additional challenges navigating the regulatory system exacerbate the impacts of disinvestment in low- and moderate-income communities of color. CBOs face bureaucratic and financial hurdles in the permitting process that sap their capacity and resources well before their visions can be implemented on the ground. To steward public space, CBOs have to navigate a complex matrix of regulatory frameworks and permitting processes across agencies like the Department of Transportation, the Department of Small Business Services, the Parks Department, the Street Activity Permit Office, the Department of City Planning, and many others. This fragmented system made it difficult for the Local Center’s technical experts to deliver results to their CBO partners.

To permit their night market, the Sunnyside Shines BID and their design team faced roadblocks obtaining allowances to temporarily close parking spaces and to get short-term concessions agreements with the City. According to Molly Brennan, Special Counsel at Phillips Lytle, “We found it challenging that even with direct connections to the agencies through the Local Center and our legal expertise, there wasn’t a uniform approach – we were still at the whim of whoever was looking at the application. We were missing a transparent process that was reasonable from the community side.”

And even after going through all these processes, some crucial elements of public space installations, like reliable access to power, cannot be permitted. Even with city support through the SBS Commercial District Lighting Grant, the Local Center’s three small BID

partners were unable to gain access to light poles and other power sources to install lighting and resorted to battery and solar powered lighting fixtures. These temporary solutions proved to be unreliable, costly, and burdensome on the neighborhood partner’s time to turn on and off every day. Tiera Mack, Executive Director of the Pitkin Avenue BID, reflected, “Our ‘Brownsville Is’ installation is supposed to be a powerful beacon in the neighborhood, but the unreliable power source is detracting from its beauty. We need a way to tap existing light poles in the neighborhood.”

● **Under-Valued Community Engagement**

Despite this challenging regulatory landscape, local CBOs can offer ideas for contextual, culturally appropriate solutions in the public realm. In order to do so effectively, they must engage a broad spectrum of community members who represent the diversity of voices in the neighborhood. Many CBOs have robust constituencies and the desire to inform decisions in the public realm, but when tasked with engaging the community in planning processes, they may lack the staff capacity and resources needed to overcome distrust in the planning and design process, often brought about by previous engagement with city agencies. Even for the most well-resourced CBOs and most connected local stewards, community engagement can be difficult and time consuming work.

At the Flatbush African Burial Ground, GrowHouse Community Design + Development Group envisioned creative activations that would engage the community to give feedback on the Parks Department’s existing plans for the site. While GrowHouse and city officials had the intention of working together, lack of resources to support GrowHouse’s time in leading engagement and accelerated city

timelines dampened opportunities for true collaboration. Shanna Sabio, Co-Founder of GrowHouse, reflected on the roadblocks she experienced: “The way that our city processes are designed, it doesn’t really engender trust. And unfortunately, activists and organizers end up taking the brunt of frustrations with the city. Part of the difficulty for me in doing the work is the time. I’m really advocating for the time to be expanded, and you also need dedicated funding to do that work.” Specifically at the burial ground site, “you need to empower the descendant community, meaning people who are descendants of enslaved people to do the work in the ways that they see fit,” she said.

The City has worked to deepen public realm improvements in under-resourced areas through programs like the Public Space Equity Program. Technical assistance providers like The Hort and Street Lab offer essential support for maintenance and programming. But there is insufficient funding and technical assistance available to support grassroots organizations and leaders in low-income communities of color. Even when public space investment does reach these communities, it does not lead to the results residents want to see. What might be possible if communities have adequate resources and our systems were built to help them shape their public spaces for the future?

What’s Next for the Local Center

To achieve equitable public spaces, we need our most disinvested communities at the helm. The Local Center is building a new model to invest in public spaces in low-income neighborhoods across New York City.

We are continuing to support our partners to fundraise for deeper investment, meaningfully engage with the capital pipeline, explore stewardship opportunities in their neighborhoods, and take on more ambitious projects. Beyond our current partners, we are building a model to resource neighborhood leaders at all levels of experience to activate their public spaces. From neighborhood leaders who are new to public realm stewardship, to experienced advocates, all need resources, capacity-building, and connections to advance their visions and a pipeline to sustain their leadership in public spaces.

● **Our vision for holistic support**

We are also working closely with city partners to establish a public-private partnership that would effectively resource local leaders and drive public space innovation. Building on our proposal for a Fund for the Public Realm, we are exploring institutional models, learning from peers, and advancing conversations with funders to test this solution.

● **Join Us!**

For all New York City neighborhoods to have the power and resources to shape their futures, we believe something bigger needs to change. Below, you’ll find -specific recommendations for City Hall, city agencies, funders, community-based organizations, and the design community. We address each separately and charge them with implementing a set of broad strategies, complemented by tactical ideas, to make progress towards the city we want to see.

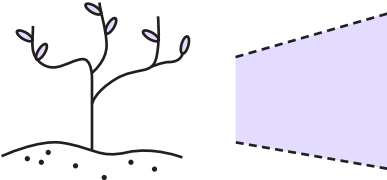
We’re grateful to build on the deep work by like-minded peers and allies, including the recent call from the Center for an Urban Future to make it easier for New Yorkers to care for their parks, new ideas for resourcing small BIDs by Tim Tompkins, the Alliance for Public Space Leadership’s Platform, Design Trust for Public Space’s Neighborhood Commons, and MAS’ Blueprint for Public Realm Leadership, as well as the thinking of many peer organizations around the country.

We see a role for everyone, but especially those with significant power and resources to champion a new way of envisioning, designing, and caring for public space that is led by the people who know it best. By redesigning our systems and investments to center the neighborhoods that have been most overlooked, the whole city will benefit.

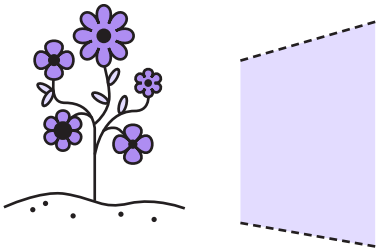
SEED Local leaders activate spaces, engage their community, and gain skills



SPROUT Local leaders pilot temporary built installations + develop public space vision plans



SUSTAIN Leaders champion longer term investment + public space transformation

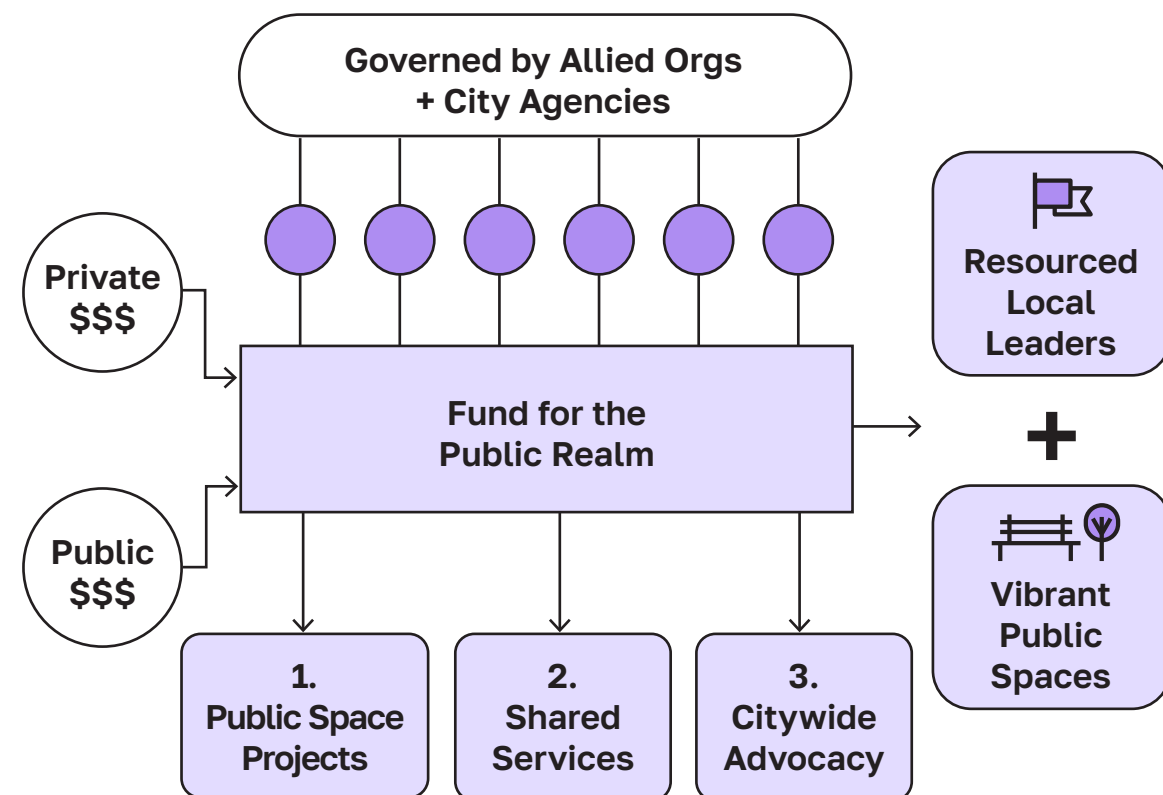




OUR IDEAS FOR ACTION

To the Mayor and City Hall

As our leaders, your charge is to set the visionary agenda and priorities for our City. If New York City can redesign our systems and refocus our investments to center the neighborhoods that have been most overlooked, the whole city will benefit. As part of your legacy, you can champion local visions for public space that reflect the diversity of the city.



We believe that City Hall can play a critical role in championing investment from city government, organizing resources from agencies and demonstrating to philanthropic and private partners that the City is committed to resourcing public spaces equitably across New York City.

We invite you to:

1. Establish a Fund for the Public Realm

We propose establishing an intermediary organization that draws on the best from public and private sectors to effectively resource local leaders and drive public space innovation. Drawing on models like the City Parks Foundation, the Fund for the Public Realm could collect and reinvest resources from

the private, public, and philanthropic sectors into local visions for public space, streamlining the bureaucracy that currently inhibits public space innovation.

This nonprofit can be governed by place-based organizations, citywide advocates and programming partners, with representation from city agencies. The Fund can advance hyper-local public space solutions to drive economic growth and address health disparities citywide:

- **Incubate public space projects in low-income neighborhoods.** Equip local partners with technical assistance and funding to develop, test, and advocate for their ideas. Pilot projects would expand opportunities for designers, planners, architects, and engineers to contribute their skills to neighborhood projects, while delivering impactful installations and vision plans.
- **Offer shared services to increase the capacity of local organizations across the city** to lead public space work through peer-to-peer learning and connections to vetted experts. Building on the Public Realm Academy and efforts led by SBS, DOT, Parks, and others, this holistic capacity-building endeavor would upskill hundreds of local organizations to navigate confusing regulations, access government resources, and more.
- **Advance Citywide advocacy through innovative multi-year pilots and partnerships** to address systemic public realm challenges like waste management and extreme heat or pilot new revenue streams.

2. Lead interagency coordination to solve for pressing challenges and boost innovation

- **Define a mutually beneficial operational partnership model between the City and CBOs** that allows for creativity in the public realm without the burden of financial risk. Work closely with agencies managing partnerships such as NYC DOT and Parks to learn from their experiences and advocate for legal and budget reforms.
- **Resource and expand the Chief Public Realm Office** to set a visionary public realm agenda that centers low-income communities of color, direct internal improvements to promote accessibility and accountability, and work closely with City Council to advocate for legislative changes.
- **Convene permitting agencies and the Public Design Commission** to audit the City's permitting processes to find opportunities for collaboration and streamlining, and define new pathways for temporary installations to extend or become permanent public space amenities.

To City Agencies

Your work is critical in ensuring our City’s services reach not just the wealthiest neighborhoods, but all of New York, and that they reflect the creativity and innovative spirit unique to our city. In order to support local visions for public space, we need city agencies, including DOT, SBS, Parks, SAPO, DCP, and many others, to work closely with City Hall and the proposed Fund for the Public Realm to streamline the regulatory system and build true partnerships between government and local leaders.

Drawing on models like the City Parks Foundation, the Fund for the Public Realm could collect and reinvest resources from the private, public, and philanthropic sectors into local visions for public space. This nonprofit can be governed by place-based organizations, citywide advocates and programming partners, with representation from city agencies. The Fund can incubate public space projects in low-income neighborhoods, offer shared services to increase the capacity of local organizations across the city, and advance citywide advocacy through innovative multi-year pilots and partnerships. As part of this effort, we invite you to:

1. Build a new partnership model between city government and local leaders to ease burdens and enable creativity in the public realm. Work with City Hall to pilot this mutually beneficial operational partnership model, which could include:

- Baseline public funding to community-based organizations activating the public realm
- Equitable contracting practices for nonprofit partners that include

advance payments, deliverable-based payments, and other practices common with for-profit vendors

- A fund for small-scale capital improvements (e.g. power access, water access, lighting, planting) that CBOs could apply to based on visioning and programming needs
- A fund for liability insurance for small CBOs to ease financial burdens on organizations looking to manage installations and program public space
- Expansion of current assessment and visioning programs, like the SBS Commercial District Needs Assessment (CDNA), with additional long-term funding for implementation and stewardship phases
- Expansion of the existing public space permitting toolkit-like DOT’s Arterventions, Open Streets, and Plaza programs, and Parks’ Art in the Parks initiative—to include creative public space activations, such as multi-functional stages, kiosks, and other functional amenities

2. Streamline regulatory frameworks to better serve CBO partners. Work with City Hall to improve systems across agencies for neighborhood organizations to activate and improve their public spaces. Ideas for innovation include:

- A regulatory interface that allows CBOs to better navigate permitting and licensing processes, including a digital tool that can adequately respond to public space needs and inquiries related to all city agencies, including SAPO, NYPD, and others
- Streamlined processes with DOT, Parks and utility companies to enable easier access to lighting and power
- More pathways for neighborhood-led public space ideas to feed into the capital investment pipeline

3. Expand and coordinate capacity building endeavors to more holistically serve CBO needs. Work with the proposed Fund for the Public Realm, City Hall and citywide service organizations to:

- Connect CBOs to a network of vetted pro-bono and low-bono service providers and vendors offering legal assistance, public relations and storytelling, human resources, fundraising, volunteer management, high-quality translation and interpretation, and other functional services
- Host recurring, accessible, multilingual trainings to orient community members and diverse stakeholders around working with public realm agencies, getting permits, contracting with the City and funding sources
- Publish accessible and multilingual resources on working with public realm agencies, getting permits, and contracting with the City

4. Move from engaging communities to being accountable to communities. Support meaningful community engagement practices that garner substantive input from diverse stakeholders by:

- Compensating experienced hyper-local CBOs and anchor institutions to design and lead accessible, neighborhood-specific community engagement plans that build trust over time
- Adequately staffing community engagement teams or partnering with nonprofits to execute meaningful community engagement
- Creating specific accountability measures on quality of community engagement, such as a rubric and evaluation process to establish a minimum baseline before a project can move forward
- Partnering with research institutions to investigate the impacts of participatory planning processes and positive outcomes in order to strengthen the case for increased investment

To Funders

In this landscape, we know government can't do it alone. Neighborhoods that have been under-resourced for decades need additional resources to be able to address urgent needs while being creative and forward-thinking in the public realm.

We believe that national, family, and community foundations, banks and financial institutions, and private donors all have a role in supporting New York's public spaces. Your partnership and resources are essential in enabling community leaders to realize their visions for thriving public spaces, and we can amplify our impact together.

We invite you to partner with communities to equitably resource community-driven public spaces:

1. Expand funding verticals to support public space

Locally-driven public space projects have myriad benefits—stronger social ties, boosted economic activity, uplifted local cultures, increased climate resilience, and more. As a result, these projects are often difficult to fit neatly into one box. Consider how your program verticals focused on public health, climate action, food security, small business development, and open space can capture the interdisciplinary work that achieves many community benefits.

2. Develop robust programs to support transformative projects

Though micro-grants of \$5-10k can support valuable small-scale programming in neighborhoods, we found that project budgets — ranging from \$125,000-\$175,000 to support a low-bono technical assistance team, neighborhood partner capacity, and a

built installation — allowed our partners to achieve robust short-term wins and set them up to champion longer-term investment. While unrestricted funding is the most flexible, your investment should, at minimum, include grants to community partners, support for technical assistance needs, dollars for implementing projects, as well as dollars to communicate the value of projects through graphic design, photography, videography, public relations and government relations. We believe this level of investment is critical to the type of lasting change our neighborhoods need to thrive.

3. Invest in multi-year projects

Public space transformation is a lengthy endeavor. While one year is enough time to get work like this started, building community buy-in, designing a demonstration, permitting with the city, and developing a vision plan in that time is a multi-year process. A minimum 18-month timeline allowed for robust community engagement, planning, and public space activation. A longer timeline to support advocacy with government agencies for capital investments is needed. With multi-year funding, neighborhoods would not be left with the uncertainty of whether the work they began can continue, and could advance on their visions with confidence.

4. Support intermediaries with flexible resourcing

As connectors, facilitators, and conveners, we heard again and again from our partners how essential our hands-on role was in helping them realize their visions for their neighborhoods. As intermediaries, we not only served as a channel for resources like funding and technical assistance, we wore many other hats: from mediating conflict, to facilitating learning communities, to navigating city agencies, to easing the bureaucratic burdens on small CBOs by subgranting large city grants. Supporting intermediaries like the Local Center with flexible resourcing is essential in building a vibrant public space ecosystem.

5. Join us in advocating for a new model

We believe intermediaries like the Local Center, or a Fund for the Public Realm, can be powerful entities to channel public and private dollars to local organizations in activating and stewarding their public spaces. We seek your partnership to most effectively make the case for this model and achieve its intended impact. If you are interested in helping us shape the Fund, we want to hear from you!

To Community-Based Organizations

Power in the public realm comes from the community-based organizations within our neighborhoods, leading programming, visioning long-term changes to the built environment, and advocating for investments and regulatory improvements. As threats to New York City communities increase, we rely on our CBOs more and more to protect our neighbors and build resilient networks. Together, we can reaffirm public spaces as critical sites of those resilient networks.

Power in the public realm comes from the community-based organizations within our neighborhoods, leading programming, visioning long-term changes to the built environment, and advocating for investments and regulatory improvements. As threats to New York City communities increase, we rely on our CBOs more and more to protect our neighbors and build resilient networks. Together, we can reaffirm public spaces as critical sites of those resilient networks.

If your organization works in any area across the community development landscape — affordable housing development, small business support, tenant advocacy, industrial development, access to and accountability of financial institutions, and more — you are likely acting as stewards of public space in some capacity, whether you are a DOT plaza partner, have conducted a Commercial District Needs Assessment with SBS, or use your local park for rallies and tabling.

Thriving, equitable neighborhoods across New York City should include world-class parks, plazas, and other public spaces, alongside affordable housing, local jobs, and robust social services. We want

to support your grassroots efforts and leadership in cultivating these spaces in your neighborhoods. Here are the steps you can take to start:

1. Imagine what's possible

With the communities you serve, develop a vision of your public spaces. Imagine them as thoughtfully designed, culturally representative, and inclusive places where your community is excited to gather. Consider how you could activate and organize your community around these spaces.

2. Pitch your ideas

Tie your ideas to housing and economic development, sustainability and resilience, and community development broadly and turn to public and private funding sources to implement a pilot project. With funding and pro- and low-bono technical assistance, you could build a stage, a lighting installation, or a storage structure in your local park or plaza.

3. Find the right collaborators

While designers, lawyers, engineers, fabricators, and other technical experts are critical to the success of your projects, you are the experts in your community's vision. Lead with your expertise to find collaborators you can trust.

4. Identify the appropriate pathways

While the permitting process can be a complex web to navigate, there are a number of tools and resources available to support you. Contact city agencies, legal experts, or the Local Center to understand site control, learn what's possible, and determine timelines. Make you sure you start on the permitting process as soon as possible and build in time for bureaucratic delays.

5. Build community power at every stage

In order to create lasting changes to your public spaces and ensure that they can evolve according to community priorities, engage residents, tenant and merchant associations, schools, religious institutions, partner organizations, the community board, local electeds, and other stakeholders in programming, collect their feedback, and continuously vision and plan for the future.

6. Join us in advocating for community-led public space solutions and structural change

The Local Center is committed to advocating for both immediate resources from public and private funders to support your efforts in public space and fixing how our city manages and allocates resources through. We invite you to join us in advocacy efforts to expand possibilities for public spaces in your neighborhoods.

To the Design Community

Whether you're a designer, engineer, or lawyer, lending your skills to New York City is a civic service. As some neighborhoods receive consistent design upgrades in their public spaces, neighborhoods where low- and moderate-income people of color live receive very few or even none at all. We see your enthusiasm, within professional organizations and design education institutions, to change this pattern and root your practices in communities where resources are most needed.

Your unique skills demonstrating possibilities, thinking holistically, and making visions tangible — when brought with compassion and empathy — can be powerful tools for change. In order to support local visions for public space, we need the design community to partner with local leaders in new ways. So how do we do it? We invite you to consider our learnings from working with seven project teams:

1. Approach your practice in a new way

This isn't your typical client relationship. In realizing community visions for public space, it is essential to recognize from the beginning that everyone is bringing something to the table.

You may bring technical expertise, creative tools, facilitation chops, and even your personal experience. You may be working with people who have been let down by design processes in the past, or alienated by technical language. Consider how you can stay grounded in accessible language and human experience, and bring some of yourself to the table too. A neighborhood organization may be bringing rooted local relationships, government relations chops, and technical skills of their own. We've found that building a strong partnership starts from a place of

listening, empathy, and building trust — often in person (not just on a video call or over email!). Be prepared to show up and to stick with it.

2. Build an agreement that is more than a contract

Getting on the same page at the beginning of a project is essential in working well together. Local Center teams were most successful when they had clear conversations about their partnership and working relationships, not just project scope. Consider talking through and putting on paper:

- **Shared Values:** What values, like building community ownership or staying grounded in local needs, are guiding your work together? These can be your touchstones as you progress together.
- **Community Agreements:** How do you want to work together? Learn about and agree on shared frameworks, such as 'step up, step back' and 'recognize intent and impact,' that can address power dynamics and allow for all team members to contribute.
- **Roles and Expectations:** Who is responsible for what pieces of the work? Detail out your expectations, so that each team member feels em-

powered to lead and support where it best aligns with their skills and knowledge. Unlike many client relationships, you may need to think flexibly about your role as a designer to take on new roles such as a facilitator, translator, and thought partner.

- **Communication Channels:** How will you communicate? Neighborhood partners or the people they work with may be operating on channels beyond email, like WhatsApp, Signal, or others. Be prepared to adapt your style to meet that of the groups you're working with.
- **Project Scope:** What are you each responsible for delivering? Though you may come into a project with a scope in mind, have a conversation about how you would adjust if things shift, pathways for bringing in additional support should you need it, and how you'd solve problems together.

3. Build complementary teams

As you build a team, consider how you can draw on your own strengths and partner with others to fill gaps. Each project will have distinct needs. Core capacities we have seen as critical along the way include:

- **Community Engagement:** Inclusive tools and approaches were critical in complementing partners outreach efforts.
- **Design:** Renderings and planning can visualize a space or installation, and design thinking helped expand possibilities for the projects.
- **Engineering:** Especially when constructing installations, it's critical to have an engineering eye (and possibly even a sign-off!) to give permitting agencies confidence about your plans.
- **Legal:** Dedicated support to help navigate agency permitting pathways and other land use questions was essential. Many law firms have

robust pro-bono practices to partner with and learn from.

- **Fabrication, Art, and Other Creative Collaborators:** Partnering with local fabricators and artists can build local buy-in and incorporate unique local culture into your project.

4. There is value beyond fees in contributing to locally-driven projects.

Across our projects, we found that lead design teams, ranging from 2 to 10 people in size, spent an average of 880 hours over the course of 12 to 18 months, while lawyers and engineers spent an average of 250 hours. Firms created low- and pro-bono programs that allowed them to allocate staff time in creative ways.

Beyond fees, these projects have provided firms with great visibility around corporate social responsibility, opportunities to present their work at local and national conferences, and emerging staff to progress in their leadership. Demonstrating your leadership in social practice can raise the profile of your firm as a whole.

Finally, Local Center teams are continuing to work with their partners with support from new grants or city contracts. Your involvement in projects at an early stage can build critical momentum to welcome in more resources, and potentially continued partnership that can build for years to come.

5. Join us in advocating for community-led design solutions and structural change

The Local Center is committed to expanding opportunities for emerging and established designers, planners, architects, and engineers to contribute their skills to neighborhood projects through the Local Center, and through our proposal for the Fund for the Public Realm. We invite you to join us in advocacy efforts to city government and funders to enable community-driven projects across New York City.

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Advisory Committee

Sincere thanks to the Local Center Advisory Committee, a group of practitioners and leaders from the fields of urban planning and design, city government, philanthropy, and community development. In 2024, the Advisory Committee convened on a monthly basis to map the systemic challenges facing multiple sectors that influence the public realm, investigate barriers to change, and ideate potential solutions. The recommendations have also been informed by the challenges experienced by Local Center project teams, whose stories we’ve shared above.

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About the Local Center

The Local Center equips local leaders with technical assistance, funding, and connections to reclaim public spaces in their communities. Learn more at: urbandesignforum.org/initiative/the-local-center/

Urban Design Forum connects and inspires New Yorkers to design, build and care for a better city. We are a member-powered organization of 1,000+ civic leaders committed to a more just future for our city. We bring together New Yorkers of diverse backgrounds and experiences to learn, debate, and design a vibrant city for all.

Association for Neighborhood & Housing Development (ANHD) builds community power to win affordable housing and thriving, equitable neighborhoods for all New Yorkers. As a member organization of 80+ community groups across New York City, we use research, advocacy, and grassroots organizing to build equity and justice in low-income, historically marginalized neighborhoods and city-wide.

Urban Design Forum thanks their Board of Directors

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